

Improving the National Football League's (NFL) Strategy of Reducing Waste from Unused Championship Merchandise

Jessica Dean,¹ McGill University

Abstract:

The manufacturing of merchandise for the National Football League's (NFL) championship games generates significant waste. While there's presently a collaboration with the charity Good360 to redistribute excess merchandise to communities in need, the fundamental problems of overproduction and excessive consumption remain unattended. Importantly, this surplus merchandise is shipped primarily to developing countries, where it both highlights the NFL's role in global consumption chains and raises questions about the impact of such donations on local markets. This policy brief presents two viable solutions: (1) implementing team-neutral championship merchandise to reduce waste, (2) renegotiating licensing agreements with clothing manufacturers to minimize overproduction, and (3) introducing American football starter packs in developing countries alongside surplus redistribution to foster sports participation,

¹Jessica Dean recently completed her Master of Arts in Political Science at McGill University, specializing in International Development Studies. Her research examines how populist rhetoric and public opinion intersect in Canadian politics, with a focus on immigration, regional inequality, and political discourse. She was awarded a SSHRC Canada Graduate Scholarship for her research and has served as a teaching assistant in courses on international relations, foreign policy, and development. Her broader research interests include governance, peacebuilding, and the role of rhetoric in shaping democratic institutions. Passionate about evidence-based policymaking and inclusive communication, she aims to bridge academic research and public understanding of global political and developmental issues.

community engagement and forced acknowledgement of where the league's waste goes. These proposals offer clear, feasible strategies to combat waste, promote sustainability, and expand the sport globally. By aligning with efforts to combat fast fashion and encourage sustainable consumption practices, these recommendations contribute to a more environmentally conscious and socially responsible NFL.

Problem/Issue definition:

In 2024, consumers spent a staggering \$17.5 billion during the Super Bowl weekend (Tighe, 2024). In anticipation of this, the NFL annually prints hundreds of thousands of items for its conference games, the American Football Conference (AFC), the National Football Conference (NFC), and the Super Bowl. Both teams' merchandise is preprinted in preparation for potential championship wins. However, items featuring the losing team are redirected to developing nations to prevent their circulation among collectors and domestic fans. For instance, in 2014, 100,000 clothing articles were printed for each side, amounting to approximately \$2 million worth of clothing, which was then donated to developing nations (Alyson, 2014). Since then, Good360 has maintained confidentiality regarding both the quantity of merchandise and its destination, effectively preventing these items from being sold in the American market as vintage, which could potentially discredit the league. This practice not only ensures the effective utilization of surplus merchandise but also safeguards the integrity of the NFL. An illustrative example of the potential risks is evident in a case where a "misprint" T-shirt from the Cincinnati Bengals' Super Bowl XXIII champions fetched \$10,000 on eBay in 2022 (Mueller, 2024). In the present landscape, the philanthropic initiative distributes surplus merchandise to regions in Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America. While framed as charity, this practice embeds the NFL's production decisions directly in international trade and development dynamics, making the issue one of global relevance rather than solely domestic waste management.

However, this is an empty charitable deed that masks careless production and endless consumption. By outsourcing a significant portion of its garment manufacturing to countries like China and Bangladesh, the NFL perpetuates a cycle of fast fashion, characterized by the rapid turnover of clothing items designed for short-term use before being discarded. Consequently, these surplus items are funnelled back into developing nations, overwhelming local markets and exacerbating environmental challenges by contributing

to overflowing landfills. The average American discards “82 pounds of textile waste annually, contributing to a staggering 11 million tons of textile waste generated solely within the United States” (Morgan, 2015). This massive influx of discarded clothing items further burdens developing nations, perpetuating a cycle of environmental degradation and economic instability. As a formidable non-state actor with a substantial net worth, the NFL possesses both the resources and influence to instigate transformative change in addressing this global crisis.

Policy Options

Produce Neutral Championship Merchandise

The collective value of all 32 NFL teams currently stands at an impressive \$142.87 billion (Ozanian, 2022). However, due to its private status, the NFL keeps its financial details confidential. Nonetheless, estimates suggest that in 2023, the league generated approximately \$12 billion in revenue (Pavlovic, 2023). While the NFL is a multi-billion-dollar industry, with significant revenue streams from networks, advertisements, and merchandise, the latter constitutes less than 9% of the industry's total revenue (Eckstein, 2024) (See figure in the appendix). Championship merchandise accounts for only a small portion of total sales, and modifying the team design and logo would pose minimal risk to the overall revenue scheme.

By adopting team-neutral designs for championship T-shirts and merchandise, the sports industry can markedly decrease waste while ensuring fans still have access to readily available memorabilia. This strategy has been successfully implemented by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), which oversees 24 sports categories for both men and women at the collegiate level. The NCAA has embraced this approach since its inception, showcasing its viability and efficacy.

To cater to fans' desire to have their favourite team's logo on championship shirts, a proposed solution is to unveil special championship merchandise during the team's city parade the following week. This event enables players, coaches, staff, and their fans to collectively celebrate their success. Providing championship shirts to everyone ensures they possess a sentimental keepsake, preserving the memory of their achievement indefinitely.

Feasibility: This policy option is extremely feasible, as it builds on existing practices within organizations like the NCAA and requires minimal changes to the production process for championship merchandise.

Cost-Benefit Analysis: While there may be small initial costs associated with implementing this policy, such as redesigning merchandise templates, the long-term benefits in terms of waste reduction and environmental sustainability outweigh these costs.

Revising Licensing Agreements to Limit Overproduction

Another policy option is for the NFL to revisit and reform its licensing agreements with manufacturers and distributors of championship merchandise. Currently, overproduction is baked into these contracts: manufacturers print gear for both teams in advance to meet the high demand for immediate post-game sales. While efficient for short-term profits, this model generates an unsustainable surplus of listing-team merchandise that must be donated abroad. The NFL can mitigate this problem by negotiating stricter production caps, incentivizing just-in-time manufacturing, and requiring partners to adopt and demonstrate measurable waste reduction practices. Such reforms would not only decrease the volume of excess goods that flood developing countries but also push apparel partners toward industry-wide sustainability standards. In doing so, the NFL would position itself as a global leader among sports leagues in tackling the environmental and reputational risks of fast fashion.

Feasibility: Revisiting the licensing agreements will require negotiations with powerful manufacturing partners, some of whom may resist changes that limit production flexibility. However, the NFL's bargaining power, global reach, and financial clout give it leverage to impose higher sustainability standards. Precedents in the apparel industry show that contractual reforms are possible when brand reputation is at stake and consumer demand for ethical production provides further pressure.

Cost-Benefit Analysis: The costs of renegotiating contracts and monitoring compliance are relatively low compared to the reputational benefits of aligning with global sustainability norms. Reducing overproduction directly lowers disposal costs and prevents the negative optics of flooding developing nations with surplus gear. While there may be a short-term risk of fewer immediate sales, the NFL can offset this by emphasizing post-game, team-specific merchandise release that fans value more highly as an authentic collectible. Over time, this strategy enhances brand loyalty, reduces environmental impact, and aligns the league with global sustainability goals.

Enhancing Football Development Through Jumpstart Kits Donation

In conjunction with the continuance of shipping losers' merchandise to developing countries, an additional option to offset the potential waste while fostering a positive impact is to include American Football starter packs or provide other resources to introduce the sport into the region, along with the donations.

A great initiative to be inspired by and replicate is the FIFA (Fédération Internationale De Football Association) Forward Report, they have, "over 1,600 projects with a long-term impact on football development were approved, 208 projects focused on new or revamped competitions, providing playing opportunities for more than 300,000 male and female players worldwide" (FIFA Global Report

2016-2022). Additionally, support for national teams to participate in international competitions, friendly matches, and training camps was provided through 162 projects. A comparison underscores the tangible benefits of this outreach effort through global involvement, viewership, and support. For instance, the Super Bowl garnered a viewership of 123 million viewers in 2024 (Statista, 2024), while the 2022 FIFA World Cup final reached 1.5 billion (Sumerscales, 2023).

The past season has vividly demonstrated the transformative influence that influential figures can wield in promoting American football. Consider Taylor Swift's remarkable impact, raising viewership by up to 15%, resulting in a staggering \$341 million revenue boost for the organization (Blatt & Paris, 2024). Envision the potential ripple effect on a national scale. Embracing this policy represents a pivotal step toward realizing such widespread engagement and support.

Feasibility: Donating football starter packs or resources to introduce the sport in developing countries is a viable but significantly more expensive alternative compared to the initial policy option. While FIFA allocates around 2.8 billion USD for investment in its 211 member associations annually (FIFA Global Report 2016-2022), replicating this on a smaller scale, say one-tenth, would require the NFL to invest 280 million USD. However, this investment would represent less than 0.02% of the league's annual revenue, which is comparable to the salary of a single player, such as Joe Burrow, who is currently on a \$275 million contract for five years (Sportrac, 2024).

Cost-Benefit Analysis: There will be high initial costs associated with procuring and distributing American football starter packs. Nonetheless, there will be long-term benefits in terms of promoting sports participation, skill development, and community engagement that will outweigh the costs. Additionally, the potential for increased viewership and revenue generation adds further value to the investment.

Recommendations

Implement Team-Neutral Championship Merchandise

- Clear Objective: Redesign championship merchandise to remove specific team logos, facilitating substantial waste reduction.
- Measurable Outcome: Track decrease in pre-printed and shipped merchandise featuring losing teams to gauge policy effectiveness.
- Feasibility: Achievable through minimal changes with a cost-effective approach. This is the cheapest and most viable option.
- Expected Impact: While initial fan dissatisfaction may occur, minimal sales impact is anticipated due to significant Super Bowl merchandise purchases. The introduction of special products at the city parade is expected to offset any potential sales dip.
- Required Resources: Initial investment for redesigning merchandise templates and ongoing monitoring for policy compliance.

Revise Licensing Agreements to Limit Overproduction

- Clear Objective: Reform licensing contracts with manufacturers to cap pre-production, require just-in-time printing where possible, and embed waste-reduction standards in agreements.
- Measurable Outcome: Track reductions in the volume of surplus merchandise produced annually and monitor compliance with contractual waste-reduction clauses.
- Feasibility: Achievable through the NFL's strong bargaining position and brand leverage, though it may face initial resistance from manufacturers.

- Expected Impact: Reduces waste at its source, limits the need for offloading merchandise internationally, and improves the league's reputation for sustainability. Over time, it enhances fan trust and positions the NFL as a global leader in responsible sports merchandising.
- Required Resources: Legal and administrative capacity to renegotiate contracts, modest investments in monitoring compliance, and communication strategies to reinforce the NFL's sustainability commitment.

Introduction of Football Starter Packs in Developing Countries

- Clear Objective: Provide football starter packs or resources to introduce the sport in developing countries, promoting sports participation, skill development, and community engagement.
- Measurable Outcome: Measure the increase in sports participation and skill development among youth in target regions through distributed starter packs.
- Feasibility: Utilize existing distribution channels for sports merchandise and collaborate with local organizations and governments to facilitate football program introduction.
- Expected Impact: Expected to foster positive social impact and sustainable development in target regions.
- Required Resources: Initial investment for procuring and distributing football starter packs, ongoing support for program monitoring and evaluation, and collaboration with stakeholders to ensure sustainability.

Conclusion

By prioritizing these policy options, this sports organization can make meaningful strides toward promoting environmental sustainability, fostering youth development, and leveraging the power of sports for positive social impact. The addition of stricter licensing agreements

directly addresses waste at its source, while team-neutral merchandise and targeted donations strengthen the league's reputation internationally. As a significant player in a diverse global landscape, the NFL possesses the resources and influence to enact meaningful change and positively impact the lives of thousands. Many international organizations, such as Eco-Age, Waste & Resource Action Programme and Greenpeace, lack the necessary funds to implement change and gain global attention. The NFL has the money and following to push sustainable practices into action. Fast fashion, to feed overproduction and mindless consumption, is a worldwide issue that is detrimental to developing nations and directly blocks their improvement. Non-state actors like the NFL can champion a goal-based narrative for more mindful consumption and think twice about where waste and charitable donations go. With the three policy options presented, the NFL has an actionable framework that not only reduces waste but also strengthens its role as a global leader in sustainability and sports management.

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